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SUBJECT: NIGERIAN MILITARY OPERATION RESULTS IN CIVILIAN
"COLLATERAL DAMAGE"

REF: LAGOS 276

Classified By: Consul General Brian L. Browne for Reasons 1.4 (D & E)

This is a Joint Consulate General - Embassy Abuja report.

¶11. (C) Summary: Bayelsa state representatives acknowledged that innocent civilians were probably killed by Nigerian soldiers on February 19 when the military raided the community of Odioma in search of the killers of twelve civilians two weeks before. Bayelsa state representatives characterized the civilian deaths as regrettable "collateral damage." They added that "mini-crises" such as Odioma were routine Niger Delta occurrences. The National Senate has established an investigative committee to examine the events.

"Cult" Group Kills 12. JTF Response Operation
Results In Civilian Deaths

¶12. (SBU) On February 3, armed men reportedly affiliated with the "Teme" cult group killed twelve civilians, including four local council members, who were attempting to mediate a dispute between the Odioma and Obioku communities over distribution of benefits from a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Shell Petroleum and Development Company (SPDC). The Nigerian military Joint Task Force (JTF) responded to this incident by raiding the community of Odioma to "fish out" those responsible. (reftel)

¶13. (C) Two independent journalists told us the JTF likely used excessive, indiscriminate firepower in its Odioma operation. Village residents told the journalists the military fired randomly into their homes and they were forced to "seek refuge in the bush." The journalists confirmed they saw photos of many burned houses and that hundreds had clearly been displaced. The journalists could not confirm the number of civilian deaths. Estimates, however, range from a few dozen to several hundred.

¶14. (C) Senior-level Bayelsa State government officials acknowledged to us that JTF members likely had killed innocent civilians during the operation. They maintained that the JTF met armed resistance when soldiers entered the community. In responding to this resistance, civilians were killed, state officials maintained. These state officials characterized the deaths as regrettable, but necessary "collateral damage." Bayelsa State Secretary General (SSG) Steve Azaiki told us, "If you are driving a car with seven passengers, and suddenly a person appears on the road in front of you, you can either hit the person, or swerve to avoid him but kill your passengers instead. The state had to act to save the largest number of people. Though of course we are sad that innocents were killed." Bayelsa state governor Diepreye Alamieyeseigha initially took a hard public line defending the JTFs actions, but later publicly apologized to Odioma village residents.

¶15. (C) In our private meeting, State officials brushed off the Odioma incident as "routine Niger Delta violence." This Day newspaper attributed similar sentiments to Governor Alamieyeseigha. When asked about the National Senate investigation into the incident, the governor reportedly responded, "As far as we in the Niger Delta are concerned, the Odioma crisis is one of such crises in the Niger Delta. So, war is a routine. If the National Assembly has to react to every situation, then clearly they will have no time to do their legislative business in Abuja because everyday, those of us on ground have to contend with one problem or the other." Alamieyeseigha assured, however, that the state would provide the committee with all information available.

Nigerian Military Response to Allegations of
Human Rights Abuse

¶16. (S) A highly placed source in Nigerian Defense

Headquarters (DHQ) confirmed that DHQ team was sent to Bayelsa to investigate the military's actions. The team was authorized and funded by the Chief of Defense Staff and was led by a Commodore representing DHQ with a Colonel for the Army, a Group Captain for the Air Force, and Commander for the Navy. The team returned to Abuja on Monday, March 14 and a formal, written report is expected. No time frame, however, for this report has been given.

17. (S) The DHQ source put the JTF's entry into Odioma in the context of two years of communal violence between Odioma and Obioku. He said the troops were fired on as they approached Odioma and responded to that threat with force. The decision to use force, he said, is delegated to the unit commander -- in this case a naval Lieutenant commander. The source would not say who generated the order to move troops to Odioma.

Who are the Teme Boys?

18. (C) Prior to this incident, public and private sources we spoke with said they had no prior knowledge of the Teme cult group. Bayelsa state officials added that they were unaware of the motive, if any, for the group's February 3 killing of the 12-member peace delegation. When pressed, they said, "Who knows with these cult groups. They are evil. Sometimes they kill for no rational reason." Some press reports claim that the group's leader, Osei Clever, is a political thug, who had been financed and armed by the governor, but now clearly was not under his control. Furthermore, there is some doubt in some quarters as to whether Clever was behind the killings since some of the 12 killed were also allegedly Teme and rarely do Teme member kill one another.

Comment

19. (C) The Joint Task Force (JTF) operates in a very confusing, chaotic battlespace in the Delta -- a roadless area divided by swamps, creeks, and some dry land. Multiple militant groups operate throughout the region and their loyalties shift on a regular basis. Distinction between friends and enemies is difficult at best. In this case, teh JTF appears to have been responding to some level of real threat from within the community.

10. (S) The swiftness of the DHQ response to the incident, and its apparent independence, is encouraging and not at all like previous responses to possibly human rights abuses. The Chief of Defense Staff seems to have gotten the message about accountability -- or is at least concerned about avoiding additional criticisms and further sanctions.

BROWNE